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ABSTRACT

In a series of national polls conducted in 1975-1976 that had people record their activities over a 24-hour time period, researchers found that on a typical day more people read a newspaper than watched television news programs. Older adults were more likely to use both news media, while young adults were more likely to use no news medium. Over the last ten years, there has been no decline in newspaper use among persons aged 18 to 24, but there has been a decline, ranging from 2% to 13%, among older age groups. These results suggest that newspapers' current strategy of catering more to their youngest readers fails to address the greatest source of attrition--the older reader. (Author/RL)

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Daily News Habits of the American Public

By John P. Robinson

HIGHLIGHTS: On a typical day, more people read a newspaper than watch a television news program. Older adults are more likely to use both news media, while young adults are more likely to use no news medium. Over the last 10 years, there has been no decline in newspaper use among persons aged 18-24, but there has been a decline, ranging from 2 percent to 13 percent, among older age groups. The author concludes that newspapers' current strategy of catering more to their youngest audience fails to address the greatest source of attrition—the older reader.

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For several years, national polls conducted by the Roper Organization for the Television Information Office have found that most Americans claim they derive most of their news from television—and that their proclaimed dependence on TV news has been increasing. These results do not square with polls done for the newspaper industry (e.g. Bagdikian 1971[2]*) and the finding that over a two-week period, less than half of the nation's adults reported exposure to a national TV news program (Robinson 1972[5]), a result more recently replicated by Stevenson (1977[7] and ANPA News Research Report No. 7[8]).

What are the exact daily news media habits of the American public? This report addresses the question employing a methodology that, while simple, offers an estimation strategy with several advantages over other approaches.

**The footnotes refer to listings in the bibliography at the end of the report.*

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Findings In Brief

Highlights of the findings from this series of nationwide studies include the following:

- On a typical day, more people read a newspaper than watch a television news program.

- Newspapers' edge over TV news is maintained across all demographic groups. However, the size of this margin does differ markedly among demographic groups.

- Substantial numbers of people among all age groups use both newspapers and TV news each day, but older persons are more likely than young adults to use both news media.

- Young adults are more likely than older adults to use no news medium on a particular day.

- Detailed analysis of the trend from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s reveals *no* decline in daily newspaper use among persons between the ages of 18 and 24. The data also show only a very small decline in time spent reading the newspaper among this same age group.

Methodology

The methodology employed simply involved asking people about their exposure to the various news media on the *preceding* day. When properly scattered across the various days of the week for different respondents, it can reflect a typical week's usage. The main advantage of this approach is that it concentrates on a single day, and one with which the individual is maximally familiar at the time. Interview questions which inquire into exposure over longer or more distant time periods are at the mercy of a respondent's ability to recall behavior over a longer time span. There is some evidence that people may overreport socially desirable behavior under such vaguer recall circumstances (Robinson 1977[4]).

In a related vein, Robinson (1972[3]) found far higher reported television viewing estimates for a "typical" day than when the same respondents reported their viewing time for the previous day (scattered across the various days of the week). This calls into question the common survey practice of asking respondents to report media behavior on a typical day.

In the present survey, respondents were asked to provide information about *all* the activities in which they participated on a particular day. That is, they were asked to fill out a time diary for the full 24 hours of the preceding day, rather than just their television viewing or print media exposure. In this way, respondents were forced to categorize their media habits in an important objective perspective, namely against the full background of activities which accompany or encompass that media exposure.

In the first, national, 24-hour, time diary study (Robinson and Converse 1972[5]), for example, almost a third of all mass media exposure was reported as a "secondary activity"—that is, as an accompaniment to eating, housework, family gatherings or exposure to other media (as when one reads the newspaper while watching television). The present study employed the same emphasis on all activities, thus minimizing the salience of news behavior to the respondent.

Nonetheless, it is clear that the time diary by itself provides an overly *conservative* measure of media exposure, if for no other reason than people vary widely in their reporting of secondary activities. It is for that reason that more reliance is placed on follow-up questions asking respondents directly about the full extent of their media exposure. To minimize social desirability further, the supplemental media questions were asked in the context of other facets of the diary day's activities.

In the present study, the Survey Research Center of the University of Michigan interviewed a national cross-section of 1,519 American adults aged 18 and over in the fall of 1975. After completing the diary of their previous day's activities, respondents were asked the supplemental questions about whether they had read any newspapers on the preceding day or had watched any television news programs.

These respondents were subsequently re-interviewed by phone in early 1976. While another diary of activities was collected at that time, no supplemental media questions were asked. However, when the same respondents were interviewed a third time in May and June of 1976, they were asked supplemental questions not only about newspaper and television news exposure, but about exposure to radio news and magazines as well; by this time, a third of the original respondents had dropped out of the survey, leaving just under 1,000 respondents in this telephone sample. No supplemental news media questions were included in the fourth and final wave of the study, taken in September of 1976 to gather a final diary to construct a synthetic week's activities across the year.

Results

Table 1 shows that on a typical fall-spring day in 1975-76, more people read a newspaper (67-70 percent) than watched a television news program (51-53 percent). The result appears in both the in-home fall 1975 survey and the spring 1976 telephone survey, although reported newspaper use is higher and TV news use

Table 1

Percentages Using News Media "Yesterday" in 1975-76
(Full National Sample)

	Wave 1 Fall 1975 (N=1,466)	Wave 3 Spring 1976 (N=978)
Newspaper	67	70
TV News*	53	51
Radio News	Not Ascertained	50
Magazines**	Not Ascertained	28

*Includes documentaries
**Includes both news and non-news magazines

lower in the spring survey. This may be due in part to some selectivity among those who remained in the survey, with both younger and lower socioeconomic groups more likely to have dropped out. (This was due to their lower access via telephone, as well.)

Table 1 also shows that daily use of magazines and radio news programs is at lower levels than those for either newspaper or TV news. Note, however, that radio news (50 percent exposure) emerges at almost as high a level as TV news (51 percent) in the spring survey. The 28 percent rate for magazines is a somewhat inflated figure for *news* content, since it contains women's and men's magazines with minimal news content. The proportion reading *news* magazines such as Time, Newsweek and U.S. News and World Report on the diary day totalled less than 5 percent, and even the addition of magazines such as Reader's Digest and People did not bring the figure to over 10 percent.

Table 2 shows that newspapers' edge over TV news is maintained across all demographic groups. However, the edge is less pronounced for those of lower income and education, for blacks and for urban and younger groups in the population. Newspapers' edge over television news is maximal for the over-$25,000 income group, for those with at least some college education, for residents of small and medium-sized cities and for people aged 30-49.

Notice that in Table 2, we have combined the data from the fall and spring surveys. This makes an effective sample base of 2,500 respondent days throughout the week. The data also have been adjusted by a multivariate computer analysis program called Multiple Classification Analysis, devised by Andrews, Sonquist and Morgan (1969[1]) to yield estimates of each predictor corrected for other predictors. In the present case, then, the Table 2 figures represent corrected differences by age, income or education. In other words, the 75 percent newspaper usage rate of people of over $25,000 income has been corrected for the tendency of this group to be better-educated, older and living in urban areas. The same is true for the estimated usage of all other groups in Table 2.

With this in mind, the systematic differences by age and social class in Table 2 support the fundamental conclusion that use of the news media follows a supplementary pattern rather than each news medium's acting as an independent source of news. In other words, people

Table 2

Adjusted Differences in Daily Newspaper
And TV News Use in 1975-76
(Waves 1 and 3 combined)

	Percent Using Yesterday	
	Newspaper	TV News
AGE:		
18-24	51	36
24-29	51	38
30-39	66	45
40-49	67	48
50-59	79	64
60-65	87	68
66 and over	90	73
EDUCATION:		
Grade school	51	42
Some high school	64	48
High school grad	73	53
Some college	73	52
College grad	74	54
INCOME:		
Under $5,000	53	51
$5,000-9,999	65	51
$10,000-14,999	72	52
$15,000-24,999	74	51
$25,000 and over	75	49
RACE:		
White	68	51
Black	58	50
SEX:		
Male	70	52
Female	67	50
POPULATION OF PLACE OF RESIDENCE:		
Over 2 million	68	58
100,000-1,999,999	73	55
10,000-99,999	68	45
2,500-9,999	66	49
Under 2,500	66	49
TOTAL	68	52

who use one news medium on a particular day are more likely to use another. The pattern is most striking by age with the important observation that *younger adults*

are not only less likely to read newspapers, but they are less likely to watch TV news programs as well. It is not so much that younger adults are less likely to read newspapers than that they are "turned off" by the news in general.

The tendency of people who use newspapers on a typical day to supplement this usage with TV news is examined more directly with the Wave 1 data in Table 3. Overall, it can be seen that 75 percent of national news viewers read a newspaper compared to only 59 percent of non-news viewers. Table 3 also shows that use of newspapers by TV news viewers does not vary systematically or widely for various age groups in the population. Nonetheless, the importance of the age factor is evident in the last column of Table 3 in which the combined use of both newspaper and TV news more than doubles, from the 25 percent combined exposure for those under age 25 to 54 percent combined exposure for those aged 55 and older.

Table 3

Relations Between TV News Viewing And Newspaper Reading
(Wave 1 Sample)

Age	Percent of TV Viewers Reading Newspapers	Percent of Non-Viewers Reading Newspapers	Percent of Persons Using Both
18-24 (N = 189)	67	49	25
25-34 (349)	66	53	30
35-54 (424)	77	62	35
55 and over (442)	81	70	54
Total (1,404)	75	59	39

At the same time, there is a trend toward lowered reliance on newspapers and heavier reliance on television news. This is shown in Table 4 in which use of the various news media are compared to rates reported in a 1965-66 national time-diary study (Robinson 1977[4]; Szalai *et al.* 1972[9]), in which only an urban-employed sample was interviewed. In order to make the 1975-76 sample strictly comparable, only the media habits of those 786 respondents in the sample who would have been eligible for the 1965-66 sample are included in Table 4.

After this correction is performed on the 1975-76 data, Table 4 shows an 11 percent decline in newspaper use, from 78 percent in 1965-66 to 67 percent 10 years later. Radio news also showed a decline, from 57 percent to 50 percent, with magazine use increasing slightly from 25 percent to 28 percent.

Use of TV news, on the other hand, rose from 46 percent in 1965-66 to 52 percent 10 years later, to the point that it is now used at a slightly higher daily rate than radio. This rise is still probably much less than what would be expected given the greater media time devoted to and professional discussion of TV news over the last decade.

Nonetheless, the combined effect of the two trends that the current 15 percent edge (67 percent-52 percent) of newspapers over TV news is only half as large as the 32 percent edge (78 percent-46 percent) 10 years previously. Two time points are an extremely fragile base from which to detect trends, however, and it could be that the lower use of TV news in the 1965-66 survey was due to some content factor (e.g. coverage of the unpopular Vietnam War).

Table 4

1965-1975 Differences in Use of News Media
(Urban-Employed Portion of the National Sample Only)

	1965-66 (N=1,146)	1975-76 (N=786)*	1965-1975 Difference
	Percent	Percent	Percent
Newspapers	78	67	- 11
TV News	46	52	+ 6
Radio News	57	50	- 7
Magazines	25	28	+ 3

*To make the 1975-76 data comparable to the 1965-66 data base, respondents who were unemployed, over age 65, in farm occupations or in non-metropolitan areas have been excluded. Wave 1 and Wave 3 data have been combined for this analysis.

In what segments of the news audience is newspapers' erosion greatest? Has it been concentrated, as

Table 5

1965-1975 Differences in Reading Newspapers
(Urban-Employed Portion of National Sample)

	1965-66 (N=1,244)	Wave 1 1975-76 (N=786)	Differences
	Percent	Percent	Percent
Age			
18-24	59	59	0
25-34	74	62	-12
35-44	81	73	- 8
45-54	86	73	-13
55-65	86	84	- 2
TOTAL	78	67	-11

is commonly assumed, within the younger, television-bred segment of the population? This question is examined in Table 5, which shows a most irregular pattern. Greatest declines are found for those aged 25-34 and 45-54, with the 35-44 age group also showing significant decline. People in the 55-65 group showed almost no decline.

More significantly, however, *no decline* is reported for the age 18-24 group—those who often have been of most concern. The 59 percent readership rate in 1975 is at exactly the same level as the urban-employed group reported in 1965-66.

Is any similar trend also evident in terms of the *time* spent with the newspaper? Table 6 examines data on the total time people (both readers and non-readers) report reading newspapers as the primary activity in their daily diaries in both 1965-66 and in the fall 1975 surveys. The drop of seven minutes per day in Table 6, from 22 minutes in 1965-66 to 15 minutes in 1975-76, is actually larger than the 11 percent drop in reading rates found in Tables 4 and 5. It means that not only are fewer people reading the newspaper, but also that those who do read are spending less time with the newspaper, *on the average.***

The more dramatic differences in Table 6, however, are by age. Again, the differences are clearly more pronounced among older readers than among younger readers, again particularly compared to those in the age group that is the subject of greatest speculation—those aged 18-24. The 18-24 age group in the urban employed 1975-76 sample did report the least amount of primary activity time reading the newspaper—only six minutes—or less than a third of the time reported by people aged 55-65 (22 minutes). However this was only three minutes less than this age group reported in the 1965-66 survey. On the other hand, the 22 minutes reported by those aged 55-65 in 1975-76 was 12 minutes less than that reported by this group in 1965-66. The 46-55 group also reported 12 minutes less newspaper reading than 10 years previously.

In terms of decline of time and attention, then, these data suggest that *newspapers ought to be as concerned about the loss among their older readership as among young adults.* Young adults do read newspapers less now than young adults did in 1965-66, but this decline is far less than reported by older respondents.

This view is reinforced if the data in Table 6 are examined on a *cohort* basis rather than on a strict age basis. Thus, those aged 18-24 in 1965 would now be in the 25-34 age group in 1975. This cohort, born between 1941 and 1947, actually shows an *increase* in newspaper reading, from nine minutes in 1965 (when between the ages of 18-24) to 10 minutes in 1975 (between 25-34). Those aged 25-34 in 1965 and 35-44 in 1975 show a drop of only one minute (from 17 to 16).

In contrast those aged 35-44 and 45-54 both show a drop of six minutes per day between 1965-66 and 1975-76. The cohort approach, then, reveals less drastic changes than Table 6 suggests, pointing as much to the *replacement* of heaviest-reading, oldest (55-65) groups by lightest-reading, youngest groups, as to *changes* in reading habits within cohorts. At the same time, the greatest within-cohort decreases in newspaper reading are found among older rather than younger age groups.

**Readers familiar with 25-35 minute estimates for newspaper reading should note that the Table 6 averages refer *only* to primary activity time and include the zero minutes figures for non-readers. In 1965-66, an additional 11 minutes of secondary activity newspaper reading were recorded in diaries and are relatively proportional across age groups. Secondary activity reading was about the same in 1975-76 as it was in 1965-66. While this means the actual drop in reading is less drastic than Table 5 would lead us to believe, it also means that close to half of all newspaper reading is now done as accompaniment to other activities.

Table 6

Average 1965-1975 Differences in Primary Activity Time Spent Reading Newspapers
(Urban-Employed Sample)

	1965-66 (N=1,244) minutes/day	1975-76 (N=786) minutes/day	Differences minutes/day
Age			
18-24	9	6	- 3
25-34	17	10	- 7
35-44	22	16	- 6
45-54	28	16	-12
55-65	34	22	-12
TOTAL	22	15	- 7

*Includes non-readers and excludes about 11 minutes per day of newspaper reading as a secondary activity.

Table 7

1965-1975 Differences in Time Spent Reading for Those Reading Newspapers

	1965-66 (N=1,244) minutes/day	1975-76 (N=786) minutes/day	Differences minutes/day
Age			
18-24	15	10	- 5
25-34	23	16	- 7
35-44	27	22	- 5
45-54	33	22	-11
55-65	40	26	-14
TOTAL	28	21	- 7

Rather than losing their younger audience to television news, then, newspapers appear to have lost this battle among the older age groups. This view is reinforced in Table 7, where the Table 5 and Table 6 data have been recombined to generate data on time spent reading *for those reading newspapers.* As in Table 6, younger newspaper readers show lower declines in reading times (5-7 minutes) than do older newspaper readers (11-14 minutes).

Again, however, the cohort approach applied to Table 7 yields a much less drastic and more systematic picture of change, as follows:

Cohort (Birth Date):

1941-49	+ 1 minute
1931-40	- 1 minute
1921-30	- 5 minutes
1911-20	- 7 minutes

Here again, the youngest group (aged 25-34 in 1975) shows an increase in reading of newspapers, with the greatest declines found in the oldest (aged 55-66) age group.

These results tend to dovetail with a cohort analysis Philip Meyer (personal communication) performed on a newspaper reading question asked by the National Opinion Research Corporation of the University of Chicago in 1967, 1972 and 1975 surveys. Meyer found greatest decreases in percentages of the population saying they read the newspaper "every day" among older than younger age groups. Moreover, he also found *increases* in estimated reading of newspapers among these younger age groups, namely those born after 1940.

Conclusion

We began with questions about how well one could interpret Americans' reliance on newspapers based on circulation figures and existing surveys on public use of the mass media. In particular, we wondered about the concern over the newspaper usage rates of young adults, a group that is usually portrayed as having been lured away from newspapers by television.

In fact, we found this age group to be the one least attracted to television news. Rather than being a generation turned off by newspapers, it is perhaps more accurately characterized as *a generation turned off by news.* At the same time, a higher proportion of this age group (like other age groups) is exposed to a newspaper than to a television news program on an average day.

Moreover, when the trends in newspaper use over the last 10 years are examined, the 18-24 age group shows less decline in time devoted to newspapers than older age groups. When examined on a cohort basis, the youngest age group actually shows *increased* use of newspapers compared to a 20 percent decline among older readers.

Newspapers' current strategy of catering more to their youngest audience may be a wise one in terms of building a future audience for their news product. However, the strategy fails to address what this study shows is their greatest source of attrition—the older reader. ■

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